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AN
ESSAY

ON

THE WISDOM, THE EQUITY, AND THE
BOUNTY

OF

DIVINE PROVIDENCE.

K
BY JOHN FAWCETT, A. M.

..... I MAY ASSERT ETERNAL PROVIDENCE,
AND JUSTIFY THE WAYS OF GOD TO MAN. MILTON.



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AN

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THE HISTORY OF THE

DIVINE PROVIDENCE



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The Wisdom, the Equity, and the Bounty

OF

DIVINE PROVIDENCE.

THERE are two ways whereby the Author of our being makes himself known unto us,—his word, and the operations of his hands, in creation, and in providence.

His word gives us the brightest and clearest display of his character and perfections, and contains the most ample and satisfactory revelation of his mind and will concerning us, his reasonable creatures. It discovers unto us our original formation after his own image and likeness; our present state of apostasy, depravity and guilt; and sets before us that divine remedy which his infinite wisdom and love have contrived and provided, for our complete redemption and recovery from that state of misery into which we have brought ourselves by sin; so that it is able to make us wise unto salvation, through faith in Christ Jesus. The works of God, in his making the world, and his governing it by his all-wise and gracious Providence, are the confirmation of his word, and designed to lead us, in conjunction with that, to a more enlarged acquaintance with himself. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handy-work. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.

By Providence we understand, the superintendence and care of the Almighty over created beings; his furnishing them with what is necessary to their subsistence, preserving, ordering and directing them, for their good, and for the manifestation of his own glory. It supposes some certain ends in view, the choice of proper means for the obtaining of those ends, and the disposing and regulating of the means, so that they may effectually promote the purposes intended.

The providential kingdom of God is managed and maintained by infinite wisdom, uncontrollable power, impartial justice, abundant mercy, and immutable veracity. These are some of the attributes of that adorable Being who presides over the universe, and governs all the creatures which his own almighty arm has brought into existence.

To attempt a formal and laboured proof of the doctrine of providence, among those who are not at all disposed to call the truth of it in question, might seem improper. Let us rather suggest a few hints which may serve for the illustration of this important subject, mention a few of the properties of God's providential government, and attempt some practical improvement of it.

By a learned and judicious assembly, God's works of Providence are said to be, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving, and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.

To suppose that events fall out by chance, without any particular care or superintendency exercised over them, by the great Creator, is to reject the doctrine in question. The conclusions which naturally arise from a denial of the government of Providence are awful. It represents the Parent of the universe as an imperfect Being; a Being de-

fective in understanding, in power, and in goodness. And as such, there cannot be a proper foundation for our supreme love to him, trust in him, or dependence upon him. This system then must shock every attentive and pious mind.

The Almighty cannot be an indifferent Spectator of the affairs of that world to which he has given being. His goodness must as certainly engage him to manage and direct them, as his wisdom and power must enable him to do it in the most effectual manner possible. That supreme intelligence and love which are present to all things, must govern all. A God without a Providence, doubtless, implies a contradiction. It is foolish to imagine, that mean and insignificant creatures are beneath the attention of the Most High. If it was not unworthy of him to bring them on the stage of existence, it cannot be unworthy of him to preside over them, and take care of their concerns. With respect to him, all distinctions of high and low in the creation vanish; as all beings are infinitely inferior to him.

The laws of nature, as they are called, are no other than the uniform agency of Providence.—The notion of a self-subsisting world, borders upon atheism. That adorable Being who formed the universe at first, is every where present in it; to it he is most nearly related, and with it, in all its parts he has the most constant and active concern.

As to ourselves, our bodies and our souls, we are assured by the word of truth, that the Lord is intimately near to every one of us; for in him we live, and move, and have our being. He is the source of all vital influence to us. We possess our lives, from the first moment of our existence to the last, by the uninterrupted emanations of his effec-

tive and governing Providence. In him we have all our powers, and all our activity of motion, both in soul and body. It is he who enables us to form designs, and to execute our purposes. Nay, it is in him that we have our continuance in being, from one moment to another. It is his Spirit that moves our heaving lungs, or they would heave no more. It is from him that we constantly receive all the advantages, the supports, and the comforts of our existence, both of the animal and rational kind.

The whole creation has a necessary dependence on that Almighty Being who is its Author. He is the life of it, by whom it is every moment actuated and sustained. Material causes are no more than instruments in his powerful hand. All their efficacy is derived from him. He is so far from being a mere spectator of what comes to pass, that were he, for one instant, to withdraw or suspend his agency, confusion would immediately and universally take place, and the whole system of nature fall to pieces. It is he that actuates and pervades the whole of this material world, whose incessant and unremitting energy is the cause to which every effect must necessarily be traced. There is not a single atom of matter on which this energy does not act, nor any one living creature with reference to which Providence has no concern.

If a sparrow falls not to the ground without our heavenly Father, much less do his children sink into adversity, or suffer calamity, without his appointment. It appears to be a truth clearly revealed in the scriptures, that whatever evils or disasters there are in the world, they are only such as an infinitely wise and holy Being was pleased to admit into it; and they can prevail no farther than

he sees fit to suffer them. He can restrain them as he pleases, and over-rule them for good in the issue.

The doctrine of Divine Providence should never be taught in such a manner, as to intimate that it destroys the free agency of created beings. This doctrine, when rightly understood, is perfectly consistent with the liberty of mankind. The prescience of the Divine Being does not change the property of things, nor put any bonds of restraint on the liberty of the human will. But metaphysical inquiries would be improper in this essay.

Divine wisdom is manifested in the structure of every object in the inanimate creation. Among the vegetable tribes, we see a most curious arrangement in all their parts; a profusion of beauty and elegance in their structure; the nicest workmanship, and the most astonishing art and design in their whole form. Does God so clothe the grass of the field, which to-day is, and to-morrow is cast into the oven; has he been thus abundant in his wisdom and skill in the lowest of his works, and can it be supposed that he is less regardful of his reasonable creatures? Shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They toil not, neither do they spin; and yet, even *Solomon*, in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of these.

Can that munificent Being, whose hand is so apparent, not only in every flower of the field, but in every leaf of the trees which adorn our hedges, and every spire of grass which we trample under our feet, can he be inattentive to his intelligent creatures? Most certainly they are, in a more peculiar way, the objects of his providential care.

All vegetable productions derive their kindly nutriment originally from the liberal hand of Providence. Obedient to its laws, the enlivening juices ascend through their proper tubes, and fermenting under the influence of the sun and the air, are at length so matured, as to break forth into an endless variety of buds, leaves, blossoms and fruits. Surely these are the wonderful works of him who, in a way of Providence, is the Saviour of all men, especially of them that believe; who waters the vineyard of his grace every moment; and, lest any should hurt it, keeps it night and day.

The constant succession of vegetables and of animals, which is kept up in the world, is the work of Providence, and cannot be completely accounted for by the mere powers of mechanism, or their own artificial construction. Every plant, every animal is a new production of Divine Power, exerting itself with constant regularity, according to the plan first fixed and established by Divine Wisdom. Millions of these are continually brought into being; they are all the effects of amazing art and skill; and it is as impossible to conceive that they should rise into existence without the immediate exertion of Divine Power, as that they should create themselves. There is a constant administration of Providence through all nature.

The care of Providence over the most weak and helpless of living creatures, may justly excite admiration. They are inspired with a strong natural attachment to their young. By means of this, they nurse them up with tenderness, and seem to think no pains too great to be taken for them; no danger too great to be ventured upon, for their good and security. They caress them with their affectionate notes, put food into their mouths, suckle them,

cherish and keep them warm, teach them to gather food for themselves, and perform the part of so many nurses, deputed by the hand of Providence, to assist such feeble, helpless creatures, till they are able to shift for themselves.

Other animals, whose offspring is too numerous for the parent's provision, are cast immediately on the care of Almighty goodness. Yet every one of them is particularly furnished with what is necessary for its subsistence. This is the case with the various tribes of insects.

Admirable provision is made for some of the most helpless creatures, at a time when they must otherwise utterly perish. The winter is an improper season to afford them nourishment, when the fields, the trees and plants are naked, and the air is chilled with frost. Providence, at that season, lulls them to repose, so that, without any inconvenience to themselves, they pass the wintry months in a torpid state. All motion of the animal juices is suspended. They suffer no waste, and consequently need no recruits. The returning spring awakens them, and they immediately find every thing prepared for their ample supply, and full satisfaction.

The hand of Providence is apparent in perpetually adjusting the balance of the creatures. The terraqueous globe can afford room and support to no more than a determinate number of all sorts of animals. If they should multiply beyond proper bounds they must starve and die. To keep the balance even, Providence has determined the lives of all creatures to such a length, and their increase to such a number, as are proportioned to their use in the world. The increase of huge, majestic and terrific creatures, is exceedingly small, that the

universe may not be overstocked with them. On the other hand, the increase of such as are useful to man, is abundant. But a just balance is always wisely preserved.

Providence is to be seen in the regulation of circumstances which seem to us altogether fortuitous. The best laid schemes among men often strangely fail of success. Incidents, in themselves the most trifling, disconcert them, and bring forward some of the greatest changes which take place in human affairs. A full proof that Providence has the secret direction of what appears to us insignificant and accidental. There are many devices in a man's heart, but the counsel of the Lord shall stand. Nothing appears to be more casual and contingent than the falling of a lot; yet, even in that instance, we are taught by divine inspiration, that the hand of Providence interposes. "The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing of it is of the Lord."

We might here enlarge on the eventful journey of *Abraham's* servant, when he went to take a wife for his master's son; the inimitable history of *Joseph*; the artless story of *Ruth*, with many others, in which we find a surprising concurrence of incidents, undesigned, and unthought of by any human being, and yet all tending, in the most direct way imaginable, to bring forward the great designs of Providence. But no where do we find this observation so fully exemplified, as in the history of that divine Saviour, on whom all our felicity depends, both in this world and that which is to come. The circumstances of his birth, of his life and actions, of his sufferings, of his death, and of his resurrection, were all foretold in the prophecies relating to him; and Providence so

ordered every thing, that the whole series of divine predictions had its accomplishment. It is needless to select particular instances. The history of Christ at large, is a full and clear exemplification of the doctrine under consideration.

The hand of Providence is seen in accomplishing great designs by the most simple, weak, and unpromising means and instruments. With a sling and a stone the ruddy stripling, *David*, conquered the champion of the *Philistines*, and, in so doing, vanquished the terror, and revived the hopes of all *Israel*. The lofty and impregnable walls of *Jericho* fell down to the ground by the sound of ram's horns. *Gideon*, by earthen pitchers and lighted lamps, overcame the whole host of the *Midianites*. *Moses* wrought wonders in *Egypt*, divided the Red Sea, and brought rivers of water out of the flinty rock, by a rod in his hand. Nay, more, the redemption of the world was obtained, by one who was despised and rejected of men, who was treated with every mark of ignominy and contempt, and thought less worthy of regard than the vilest malefactor. Yet this is he who hath conquered sin and hell, death and the grave; and brought life and immortality to light. This is he who hath obtained eternal redemption for us, and is become the Author of everlasting salvation to all them that obey him; who hath washed us from our sins in his own blood, and made us kings and priests unto God and his Father, to whom glory and dominion are due for ever and ever.

When the kingdom of the Redeemer was to be established in the world, and nations, the learned and the rude, brought into subjection to it, who were the instruments employed? Rabbies, doctors, men of renown for philosophical knowledge, and

literary accomplishments? Instead of these, a few poor fishermen are selected, and appointed to the important work, who were counted the filth of the world, and the off-scouring of all things. Before them, *Satan* fell as lightning from heaven; his kingdom tottered to its very foundation. The word of God, in their mouths, ran, and was glorified. A plain sermon, preached by one of them, shall convert thousands. They were caused always to triumph in Christ, and the favour of his knowledge was made manifest by them, in every place. But the excellency of the power was of God, and not of men.

Providence affords relief, at many times, in the very crisis of need, and in the moment of extremity. At the very instant when *Haman* came in to speak to his master about the death of *Mordecai*, he found the scale of things turned, in a surprising manner, in favour of that holy man. The king had been denied the gift of sleep, and to beguile the tedious hours, he called for the book of records, and was providentially directed to the very page in which were recorded the integrity and loyalty of *Mordecai*. *Haman* is immediately called in, and commanded to shew the highest marks of royal favour towards the man whom he had wickedly doomed to an ignominious death.

David, with his handful of men, was just on the point of destruction, by the hand of *Saul*, who pursued him with a powerful army. *David* was on one side of the hill, and *Saul* on the other. The prey was almost in the teeth of the devouring lion; but just at the critical moment, a messenger arrives to inform *Saul*, that there was an invasion of his territories, which required his immediate exertions

tions to suppress. *Saul*, on this, leaves *David* at full liberty to return thanks to God, and say, "Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowler; the snare is broken, and we are escaped."

When the father of the faithful had obeyed the mysterious command of the Almighty Sovereign to the very last act, Providence stopped his lifted arm from plunging the knife in the throat of the innocent victim. "Abraham! Abraham! Lay not thine hand upon the lad, for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy Son, thine only Son from me." *Abraham* called the name of the place, with the greatest propriety, *Jehovah-jireh*, The Lord will provide; as it is said to this day, In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen. That is, in the mount of danger and extremity, it shall be seen that he will provide deliverance.

Relief is often afforded by Providence in answer to prayer, so as to make it evident, that the Governor of the universe is a very present Helper in the time of trouble. They who conclude, as the unbelieving Jews did of old, that the Lord hath forsaken the earth, that he seeth not, neither regardeth, may, consistently with such conclusions, say, "It is in vain to serve him, and what profit shall we have if we pray unto him?" But in all ages, those who have feared his name, have fled to him as their refuge, and have frequently experienced his immediate interposition in their favour.

The man after God's own heart, in the midst of his perplexity, occasioned by *Abfalom's* perfidious rebellion, supported by the artful counsels of his prime minister, prayed to the God of heaven, that

he would turn the counsel of *Ahithophel* into foolishness. He was immediately heard and answered. At the prayer of *Moses*, the man of God, the Red Sea was divided; the flinty rock was rent, and streams of water gushed forth, to supply the thirsty tribes of *Israel*. He interceded for that rebellious people, when they seemed devoted to destruction, and they were spared. While his supplicating hands were lifted up, the *Israelites* were protected and delivered from the power of the *Amalekites*. Pious *Hannah* prayed, and obtained the gift of a son, whom she named *Samuel*, Asked of the Lord. *Mordecai* and *Esther* sought God by fasting and prayer; *Haman* fell, and *Israel* was delivered. *Nehemiah*, when his heart was full of trouble, and his countenance sad, even while he stood in the presence of the king, his master, prayed to the God of heaven, and his prayer was speedily answered.— In a word; *Peter* was shut up in prison, bound with two chains, attended by soldiers, and the keepers stood before the prison doors, to guard them with the utmost security; but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him. By and by *Peter* stands, at full liberty, knocking at the gate of *John*, whose surname was *Mark*, where the pious company were gathered together praying for his deliverance. The Lord is nigh unto all such as call upon him in truth, and, in many cases, his Providence affords immediate answers to their requests.

Rewards and punishments are, in a measure, dispensed to man in the present life. Thus we see the luxurious glutton, who fares sumptuously every day, denied that precious gift of health, which is more generally granted to men of temperance and

fobriety. Remorse, with its harpy talons, hovers over the guilty sons of men, and poisons and imbibers every enjoyment; while the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keeps the hearts and rules the minds of those that love and fear him. The passions of men, indulged beyond due bounds, lead to a dreadful precipice, and plunge those who so indulge them into distraction and misery. Thus the man, who is governed by avarice, is often unhappy in the midst of abundance, and, wallowing in wealth, endures, in idea, all the ills of abject poverty. Ambition, when by toilsome steps it has gained the dignity to which it eagerly aspired, finds, on the very summit of its wishes, no rest for the soles of its feet. The man of impure desires, instead of the rose of pleasure which he seeks, often grasps the prickly thorn.

But though vice may seem for a while wantonly to bask itself in the sunny beams of prosperity, the pompous appearance is perhaps but the splendid cover of that distress which tears the heart, and rankles within the bosom. The man of unaffected piety, on the other hand, while he appears to be assailed by the chilling wintry blasts of poverty and affliction, enjoys the present reward of a peaceful conscience, and with placid resignation to his lot, relishes, in his homely fare, the satisfaction which all the laboured dainties of the rich cannot afford. Thus Providence distributes to men, according to their several characters, rewards and punishments, even in the present life.

Having thus endeavoured to illustrate the doctrine, we shall now proceed to mention a few of the properties of God's providential government.

Providence is wise. Infinite wisdom sits at the helm, directing the several movements of the vast machine of nature, to accomplish the proposed end. The mysterious wheels of God's government are full of eyes. His understanding is infinite. There cannot be the least weakness or defect in his superintendency, as there is in that of other rulers. Nothing of error or mistake; nothing which the most excellent prudence would order otherwise. No want of judgment as to things present, or want of foresight as to things to come. For the only wise God and our Saviour has all things past, present and future in his all-comprehending view, in every act of his government. "The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens. By his knowledge the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew."

Providence is universal in its operations. It clasps at once, in its parental and encircling arm, the highest arch-angel and the grovelling insect. The wants of all are supplied by its bounty. Providence feeds the young ravens when they cry. The shaggy monster of the wilderness roams after his prey, and seeks his meat from God. With unsparing bounty, every living creature is constantly fed with food convenient for it. To man, especially, Providence gives all things richly to enjoy. Bread shall be given him, his water shall be sure.

Of the Governor of the universe it is justly said, that his kingdom ruleth over all. As there can be nothing too great for his power to controul, so there cannot be any thing too mean for his infinite condescension to notice. While he rules among the armies of heaven, and disposes of the empires and

kingdoms of this lower world at his pleasure, the most insignificant reptile is the object of his care; the sparrow falls not without his observance; and the very hairs of our heads are all numbered.

The creatures which exist in the air, on the earth, and in the mighty waters, according to their various ranks, orders and generations, are astonishingly numerous; yet every one of these is the care of Providence, and at its disposal. Well may we say, with wonder, and elevated transports of delight, "O Lord, how manifold are thy works, in wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy riches." Let imagination range through the wide expanse of creation, and lose itself in pleasing astonishment. The armies of heaven, the worlds of light which roll in perfect order and harmony above our heads, and the vast regions of the air, the earth and the sea, are all formed, peopled, supported, preserved, regulated and sustained by the hand of Omnipotence. "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"

My soul, with all the pow'rs I boast,
Is in the boundless prospect lost.

The superintendence of the Almighty over his creatures, extends not only to the more momentous concerns of their existence, as some have mistakenly imagined, but to the minutest circumstances relating to it, as our Redeemer himself hath taught us, in the passages we have already cited.

He sees with equal eye, as God of all,
A hero perish, or a sparrow fall;
Atoms or systems into ruin hurl'd,
And now a bubble burst, and now a world.

It has been justly observed in favour of a particular Providence, that we cannot conceive of any reasons which can influence the Almighty to exercise *any* Providence over the world, which are not likewise reasons for extending it to *all* that happens in the world. As far as it is confined to generals, or overlooks *any* individual, or *any* event, it is incomplete, and therefore unsuitable to the idea of a perfect Being.

Some have been bold enough to ridicule the idea of a particular Providence, and have raised several objections against it, which are but so many proofs of their own ignorance and presumption. We should not conceive of the all-sufficient Jehovah as if he were like ourselves, who are often bewildered in a multiplicity of affairs; we should remove all human imperfection from our ideas of him. To infinite power and infinite wisdom all things are alike easy. It is absurd, and implies a plain contradiction, to suppose that a Being possessed of infinite perfection can ever be encumbered or perplexed.

It is reasonable to conclude, that if there be *one* event in the world, of which all the care is not taken that is *right* to be taken, the administration of the universe is *so far* defective; and, let it be spoken with reverence, the character of the Author and Governor of it is imperfect. But let us ascribe unto the Lord wisdom and strength; let us ascribe unto him the glory due unto his name. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and of his dominion there is no end.

The ways of Providence are mysterious. Sometimes we see adversity pouring all its billows over the head of him who is eminent for piety, and may be justly numbered among the excellent of the earth. But let us remember that God presides in the storm as well as the calm, and often accomplishes the purposes of his grace by measures which seem, in their own nature, pregnant with ruin and desolation. He hath his way in the whirlwind. The afflicted saint, on whom you look with a pitying eye, perhaps derives comforts from distress, and glories in tribulation; because tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope. His mind, which, amidst unnumbered trials and afflictions, is fixed on the supreme good, lively in faith, ardent in love, and fervent in devotion, might have been inebriated with the enchanting cup of prosperity, and sunk into supineness and forgetfulness of God. Happy then is the man whom the Lord chasteneth, and teacheth out of his law.

Providence ordains what comports with our welfare, though not with our wishes, and connects our felicity with our woes. The graces which might wither under too warm a beam, are made to thrive and flourish in the shade, and the happiness denied to prosperous vice, may even be gathered from the thorn of affliction, through that over-ruling Providence which causeth all things to work together for good.

The line of reason is too short to sound the depths of heavenly wisdom. Let us not presume to censure the ways of him who always directs his steady but mysterious course to the end he has in view; who, to bring his grand eventful counsels to full

maturity, makes things opposite in their natures harmoniously to combine together, that men may learn to reverence and adore him, in his incomprehensible dispensations. The threatening storm, under his direction, shall but drive the well-freighted vessel, with the utmost safety, into the haven of peace. Through his over-ruling hand, abasement itself shall exalt, disgrace shall ennoble, and adversity be productive of felicity.

The breasts of *Israel's* sons were filled with ungenerous and malignant envy towards their younger brother. *Joseph*, for a dream indicating his future dignity, was doomed to feel the dire effects of their hatred. The heart of *Reuben*, moved with tenderness, devised means to prevent the execution of his brethren's bloody designs upon the innocent and harmless stripling. By the direction of Providence the *Ishmaelitic* merchants appear in sight at the critical moment. They purchase the young *Hebrew*, and convey him, more precious than all their spicy treasures, to distant climes. The hope of the aged patriarch becomes a slave in the land of *Egypt*. For a short season his woes are alleviated, and the gloomy aspect of bondage begins to wear a smile. But the prospect is illusive; new calamities attend the exile. He falls a prey, innocent as he was, an unpitied prey to the revenge of his wicked mistress.

To the gloom of a dungeon *Joseph* is consigned, and is there detained for many long and tedious years. At length the mysterious web of Providence was gradually unfolded, and wisdom and goodness shone resplendent through the whole texture. All circumstances conspire together to realize the dreams with which *Joseph* had been favoured so many years before. Hatred, bondage,

calumny, and imprisonment do but prepare the way to honour. The scene is quickly shifted at last. The dungeon is exchanged for a throne. The young *Hebrew*, arrayed in all the dignity of regal splendour, is seated next to *Pharaoh*. He is honoured through all the land of *Egypt*, and lives to cherish his father, drooping under a weight of years and sorrows, and to pour into the patriarch's bosom the tears of filial affection and transport. His brethren, the sheaves of his dream, stand round him in amazement, and pay obeisance to his sheaf. Thus were the mysterious ways of Providence unfolded.

The infant *Moses* was hid three months by his fond parents. But when he could be concealed no longer from the rage of a blood-thirsty tyrant, his tender mother exposed him, in an ark of bulrushes, on the brink of the *Nile*. Ye mothers, say, what she must have felt on the mournful occasion. Of the dear babe, however, she must take her leave. Behold her slowly receding from the borders of the river, and casting many a tearful glance, to see what would become of the darling of her soul. But just at the critical moment, *Pharaoh's* daughter, under the guidance of Providence, comes down to the river, and to that very place where her interposition was necessary. She sees the strange deposit, orders it to be brought, and, turning aside the cover, beholds the lovely infant; and, that all her tenderness might be excited on the needful occasion, the babe wept. A nurse being required, the mother of *Moses* is called, and wondrous to tell, is paid by the princess for nursing her own child. This *Moses*, being instructed in all the wisdom of the *Egyptians*, was ordained by Provi-

dence to be the deliverer of *Israel*, and to humble the pride of *Pharaoh*.

There are many things in the œconomy of the Divine Government, which are to us, for the present, awfully mysterious. We see multitudes of mankind suffered to walk in their own ways, and to live without God in the world. Totally enslaved by their own vicious dispositions, they are unmoved by the terrors of the law, and unaffected with the grace of the gospel. They harden themselves in folly and sin, and go on to make their own destruction sure.

Others, who, in themselves, are altogether as vile and abandoned as the worst of mankind, are called, by divine grace, out of darkness into God's marvellous light; they are freely pardoned, completely justified, and made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. Of such were the polluted *Magdalene*, the once unrighteous and oppressive *Zaccheus*, the infamous woman of *Samaria*, the thief on the cross, and the persecuting *Saul* of *Tarsus*, with multitudes more, which no man can number, who are now advanced to thrones of glory.

There are many nations of the earth where the glorious light of the gospel does not shine; where the true God is not known; but men worship idols, stocks and stones, the workmanship of their own hands; while on other regions the Sun of righteousness rises, with healing under his wings.

The unequal distribution of the good things of this life, is mysterious. *Dives*, an enemy of God, is cloathed in purple and fine linen, and fares sumptuously every day; while *Lazarus*, a favourite of heaven, lies at the rich man's gate, covered with

fores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fall from the rich man's table. But the one had his good things here, the other hereafter. The one, when he died, lifted up his eyes in hell, being in torments; the other was carried by angels into *Abraham's bosom*.

We are short-sighted creatures. It is impossible for us to comprehend the whole plan of Providence, or to enter into the counsels of an infinite Being. It is sufficient for us to know, that he does every thing which it is wisest and best for him to do, for the glorifying of his own name, and promoting the happiness of his creatures.

The operations of Providence are concealed and invisible to mortal eyes, so that we cannot, in particular cases, determine in what manner they are exerted, or what are their designs. In some instances indeed, the interpositions of the Divine Hand have been open and visible; but such interpositions are very extraordinary. To expect them in common cases would be foolish and unreasonable.

There are innumerable difficulties in the conduct of Providence, in reference to which, we must, for a time, remain in the dark. Our God is in the heavens; he doth whatsoever he pleaseth, and giveth not to mortals an account of any of his matters. The volume of his mysterious purposes is sealed, and not submitted to our perusal. All that our contracted minds are capable of comprehending on this side the grave, lies within a narrow compass. We are surrounded with the mists of darkness, of prejudice, and of impurity. Let us not indulge an unreasonable curiosity in scanning the wonderful works of him who is perfect in wis-

dom. "Canst thou, by searching, find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty to perfection? It is high as heaven; what canst thou do? It is deeper than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof is larger than the earth, and broader than the sea."

Wait the great teacher, death, and God adore.

The ways of Providence have all a special tendency to promote the welfare of the church. The God of our lives is the Saviour of all men, in the dispensations of his providential wisdom and goodness, but especially of them that believe. The divine Redeemer is not only the head of the church, but the head over all things to it; governing, directing, and over-ruling every event for the spiritual and eternal advantage of his followers.

The good work of grace is not unfrequently begun by means of awakening dispensations of Providence; and amidst trials, tribulations and afflictions, it is carried on, from one degree to another. By these the followers of Jesus learn to know themselves, the emptiness, the uncertainty, and the vanity of the world, and the necessity and propriety of setting their affection on things above. Finding no rest on earth, they are brought to seek it in heaven. Disappointed in their sublunary hopes and expectations, they look for their whole felicity in him whose favour is life. They are cast into the furnace of affliction, that the trial of their faith, which is much more precious than gold which perisheth, might be found unto praise, and honour, and glory, at the appearance of Jesus Christ. Their
love,

love, their hope, their fear, their patience and humility, are all brought into exercise, promoted and improved, by the trying dispensations of Providence. Therefore the man of piety has often been heard to say, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn righteousness."

The dispensations of Providence are righteous and equitable. As an instance of this, we find that Providence deals with men by way of just retaliation. The enemies of God and goodness are sometimes taken in their own nets, and paid in their own coin. Into the pit which they have digged for others they themselves are seen to fall.

Thus guileful *Haman* was intent on the destruction of *Mordecai*, and erected a gallows for him, fifty cubits high. But, by the hand of Providence, the life of upright *Mordecai* was secured, and the proud and malicious *Haman* hanged in his stead, on the very gallows which he himself had provided for *Mordecai*. The story at length is highly interesting, and serves to illustrate the point in question.

In the place where *Naboth's* blood was shed, by the order of *Jezebel*, the dogs licked the blood of that infamous woman. By the command of *Pharaoh*, the male children of the *Israelites* were drowned; he himself, his chief men, and all the glory of *Egypt* perish in the Red Sea. All this is conformable to the declarations of the divine word; "With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. The Lord is known by the judgment which he executeth; the wicked is snared in the work of his own hands."

Of the righteous governor of the world we may well say with the prophet, "He is a rock, his

work is perfect, all his ways are judgment; just and right is he. Clouds and darkness are round about him, but justice and judgment are the habitation of his throne."

The dispensations of Providence are all ordered according to the eternal purpose of him who worketh all in all. If we believe the testimony of his own word, we must be persuaded of this. For we are there assured that he worketh all things according to the counsel of his own will.

We shall only add, as to this part of our subject, that it seems pretty evident, from the sacred scriptures, that God is pleased to employ the instrumentality of angels in accomplishing some of the designs of his Providence. But as these subordinate agents are to us invisible, it is impossible to tell how far their instrumentality extends. Of this, however, we may be certain, that they all act, in every instance, under the superintendency of the Supreme Being. They are his ministers to do his pleasure.

We shall close with some practical hints, by way of improvement.

Let us acquiesce in the disposals of Providence, and be content with the lot assigned us. Were the world under the government of necessity or of chance, we might justly be disquieted. But the Lord reigneth. Almighty power, in conjunction with unerring wisdom, and infinite goodness, will manage all our affairs, and order every thing for the best. If poverty and adversity are appointed for us, let us never indulge a repining thought, but submit to them with becoming resignation, as the allotments of unerring Providence.

Let us give up our own wills to the will of our Maker and Governor, carefully suppressing all so-

solicitude about what may befall us in this imperfect state, and never eagerly wish to enjoy any thing which Providence is pleased to deny us, or to be exempted from those trials which are allotted to us, for the promotion of our best interests. Let us bid welcome to all events; even to disappointment, to disease, and to death itself, since Jehovah reigns, and his eternal wisdom and mercy preside every where, and rule over all.

Let us view the fulfilment of the sacred scriptures, by the dispensations of Providence. We find, in the inspired writings, many predictions of events very distant from the periods when those predictions were delivered. It is of great utility to mark the accomplishment of them. By so doing, our faith in divine revelation will be confirmed. The dispersion of the *Jews*, the general corruption of christianity by popish superstition, and the fall of antichristian tyranny, are events frequently and clearly foretold. While these circumstances take place, under the superintendency of Providence, exactly according to what is written by the prophets, we know that those holy men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. Providence gives a satisfactory comment on those mysterious predictions, which could not otherwise be understood.

Let us learn to trust in Divine Providence for all we need, with unshaken confidence. The practical belief of it should so operate on our hearts, as to render us calm and serene in all conditions. No perplexing fears, no anxious, desponding solicitude should possess our bosoms; since whatever may happen to us, we are under the protection of infinite power, the watchfulness of unbounded wis-

dom, and the care of sovereign mercy and goodness. While we are attentive to the path of duty, and the rules of prudence and diligence, we have all possible encouragement to trust Providence for whatever we need, and to cast all our care upon him who careth for us. A pretended trust in God, unconnected with proper exertions and activity in the way of duty, is presumption. But trust in the Lord, and do good, dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. The notion of a superintending Providence does not exclude, on our part, the vigorous use of proper and appointed means. The means are included as necessary to the end.

It is the will of Providence that seed-time and harvest shall not cease; but if the husbandman, under a pretence of trusting Providence, should expect to gather in a plentiful crop, without the necessary culture of his grounds, he would find himself disappointed; and every one would censure his confidence and conduct as ridiculous, inconsistent and absurd. The certainty of *Hezekiah's* recovery from his sickness, did not render the use of the remedy appointed for that purpose unnecessary; neither did the assurance given him, of living fifteen years longer, imply that he had no need to take any care about the preservation of his life and health.

Trust Providence while you are diligently attentive to the duties incumbent upon you.

Let us look up, by constant, humble and fervent prayer, for the guidance, the protection, and the various blessings of Providence. God is intimately present with us every moment, to observe all our thoughts, to know all our wants, and to dispose of all the circumstances of our existence. Whatever falls out he can over-rule to our advantage, and grant suitable answers to all our re-

quests. Nothing can be more proper than that we should entreat his favour with our whole hearts, seek his protection, fly to him in every danger, request his aid for the accomplishment of our laudable designs, and ask of him our daily bread.

Let the hand of Providence be constantly acknowledged by us. Let us ever keep in mind the care of the Almighty over us, and maintain a deep sense of it upon our hearts from day to day. Let us, in all our undertakings, look to him for success. Let us, in all our ways, acknowledge him, and he will direct our paths. We are prone to neglect this. God is ever near us, and yet we disregard the operation of his hand. He is in every breath we draw, and in every thought we conceive, and yet we are prone to forget him. His power is as much displayed in those events which are common, as in those which are more extraordinary. By the latter we are roused and affected, but of the former we seldom take notice as we ought. Let us labour to acquire a habit of carrying up our views to Providence, on all occasions.

It is criminal and impious to terminate our views on the objects of sense, and forget the Almighty hand which upholds us, and provides all for us, and to ascribe to chance, to fortune or to fate, all the good or the evil which attends us.

Let us rejoice in the privilege of being under the wise and merciful government of God. Within the embraces of his arms we are always safe. * Con-

* For this, and several other remarks, the author of this essay acknowledges himself indebted to a Dissertation on Providence, by the late learned Doctor Price.

fiding in his care, we shall not only be freed from danger, but from solicitude and anxiety. To exempt us from that care, the weight of which we are not well able to sustain, he is willing to take it upon himself. "Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he will sustain thee." Surely we should think it a peculiar felicity to be under such a gracious and condescending Governor, who is ready to bear and manage all himself, and would have nothing to lie on his subjects to the weight of which their powers are unequal. He even counts it a dishonour done to him, when we are solicitously anxious about those things which he has undertaken to regulate and manage for us; because this anxiety implies, in its very nature, either that the Lord is not able, or not willing to order what concerns us for the best, and as it should be ordered.

When *Melancthon* was extremely solicitous about the affairs of the church, in his day, *Luther* admonished him in these terms; 'Let *Philip* no longer take upon himself the government of the world.' The government of church and state is upon the shoulders of our omnipotent Redeemer; and he is sufficient for it. He will order every thing better for us than we could do for ourselves. The good of his subjects is always kept in view, in his various dispensations; and this is so happily connected with his own glory, that whatever advances his honour, tends to promote their happiness. Let us be thankful, then, that we are under his paternal care. "Rejoice in the Lord, O ye saints of his. Say among the heathen, that the Lord reigneth. Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad. For he shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor. He shall deliver the needy when he

crieth; the poor also, and him that hath no helper. He shall redeem their soul from deceit and violence; and precious shall their blood be in his sight."

Let us wait the issue of Providence. We are now perhaps tossed on a tempestuous ocean; the waves and billows of affliction seem to threaten our destruction; but let us have patience a little while. Our Almighty Preserver sits at the helm. He, who holds the winds in his fist, and the waters in the hollow of his hand, has the sole direction and management of that voyage of life which seems to us so full of danger. Under his incessant inspection and wise governance, our little bark will be guided safely into the port of peace; and then we shall look back on all his dealings with us, with admiration, astonishment and gratitude; and see that he has done all things well. The whole scene of his providential dispensations will be opened to our wondering eyes, and we shall see that every thing has been ordered for the best. We shall see that all his dealings with us have been full of wisdom, faithfulness and love. "Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God hath led thee, to humble thee, to prove thee, and to know what was in thine heart."

Have patience for a short season, and every dark cloud shall be dispelled. Rest satisfied, that though clouds and darkness are round about him, yet justice and judgment are the habitation of the Almighty's throne. He says to you, amidst your present perplexities, "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter." By and by you shall see, that your heaviest afflictions were of the number of your greatest mercies. What appeared nothing but confusion and disorder, to the feeble and

erring eye of sense, you will perceive to have been all harmony and perfect regularity. The very circumstances concerning which you have too rashly said, in the gloomy hour of despondency, "All these things are against me," you will clearly see have wrought together for your highest good. The Lord will then bring you forth to the clear light of unclouded and celestial day, and you shall behold his righteousness, the equity, the propriety, and the wisdom of his whole conduct. The things which now occasion your deepest sorrow, will then excite your loudest songs.

Great advantages result from an attentive and humble observation of the dispensations of Providence, respecting ourselves, our families, and the religious societies with which we may stand connected. As such, we think it highly proper for those, who have ability and opportunity, to preserve written memorials of some, at least, of the most remarkable interpositions of the divine hand in their favour. Such memorials might be of service to themselves, when new straits and difficulties attend their path. It is true, the things which deeply affect us are not easily forgotten; but we all know, that our recollection of past deliverances often fails us, when we are under the immediate pressure of some heavy calamity. Nor will such records of God's dealings with us be useful to ourselves alone, but, it is highly probable, they may prove beneficial to others, when we are numbered with the dead.

Thy ways, O God, are in the sea,
Thy paths we cannot trace;
Nor comprehend the mystery
Of thine unbounded grace.

'Tis but in part, we know thy will,
We bless thee for the sight;
When will thy love the rest reveal
In glory's clearer light?

Here the dark veils of flesh and sense
Our captive souls surround;
Mysterious deeps of Providence,
Our wond'ring thoughts confound.

When we behold thy awful hand,
Our earthly hopes destroy;
In deep astonishment we stand,
And ask the reason why.

As through a glass, we dimly see
The wonders of thy love;
How little do we know of thee,
Or of the joys above.

When will the day of perfect light,
The happy morn arise,
That shall remove the shades of night
From our beclouded eyes?

With rapture shall we then survey
Thy Providence and grace,
And spend an everlasting day
In wonder, love and praise.

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